

THE TASKS OF GRIEVING

There are, of course, many different theories about, and ways of looking at the process of grief. As a SIDS professional, you may, for example, have heard grief described as a series of five phrases (as espoused by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross during the late 1960's).

A more current understanding of bereavement (first developed by Dr. J.W. Worden in the early 1980's) identifies grief not as a succession of phases through which a person passes and over which he/she has little or no control, but as a series of four *tasks*, which a person must work hard to complete:

- **Accepting The Reality of The Loss:** After any death, grieving family members and friends usually express disbelief – “I can’t believe this is happening to us,” or “How could my baby be dead? He was fine when I put him down for his nap just 20 minutes before.” SIDS family members often experience strong feelings of wanting their babies back at all costs or wanting to know, or assign, a certain cause to (or blame for) their babies’ death. Their first task, then is to accept that their child has died, that nothing could have prevented the death, and that they will not ever have their baby back.
- **Experiencing the Pain of Grief:** While SIDS family members begin feeling the pain of grief from the moment they discover their babies have died, the full extent of their pain may initially be “numbed” by the shock or disbelief surrounding the death. Many family members experience their most intense pain (both physical and emotional) after they have accepted their loss and are trying to resume “normal living”. Unfortunately, it is also generally at this time that the family ceases to receive comforting calls and notes from friends, and is expected to return to their usual productivity at work. Such sudden absence of attention and increased (often unrealistic) expectations from others leads family members to feel isolated and may cause them to suppress their pain. Only by allowing themselves to express and release their pain, however, will family members be able to move forward through grief.
- **Adjusting to A Life Without the Baby:** As the pain of grief is released and begins to subside, family members begin finding ways to accommodate the changes in their lives brought on by the baby’s absence. They begin to weigh the options related to issues such as what to do with the baby’s room or things; or returning to (or taking on new projects at) work; or how to answer the question “How many children do you have?” They once again turn their full attention to parenting their surviving children, or may start planning to become pregnant. Such adjustments may be difficult because they require the family members to develop a degree of detachment from their baby. Many families, therefore, may take some time to make adjustments, and may struggle with their issues for a while before they make decisions.
- **Moving On:** As they implement their new decisions, family members will find themselves enjoying once again the people and activities that brought them pleasure before the baby was born. Their rediscovered sense of contentment, however, may be interspersed with periods of guilt or regret because they fear that, by enjoying themselves, they are forgetting the brief presence and devastating loss of their baby. Many SIDS family members will describe moving on as a process, rather than a decision; a roller coaster ride, as opposed to a stroll. Their completion of the tasks of grief may be indicated by their realization that “There are other people in the world who want and need my love – and loving them does not mean I love my baby any less.”



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